

Strategic Insight

The Moscow Hostage Crisis: An Analysis of Chechen Terrorist Goals

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At 9 p.m. on the 23rd of October 2002, forty-one Chechen separatists calling themselves the Islamic Suicide Squad took more than 800 Moscow theatergoers hostage. This precipitated a 57-hour crisis that captured the world's attention. The Chechens were armed with small arms and machine guns. They also carried a large amount of explosives, much of which was strapped to their bodies to ward off attempts by Russian authorities to take the theater by force. They sought negotiations with Russian authorities in a quest to meet their demands for an end to the war in Chechnya, withdrawal of Russian forces and Chechen independence. On 26 October, they set a deadline of 12 hours for the Russian government to comply with their demands before they would "start shooting the captives." A second deadline (seven days) demanded "to bring an end to the war...or they would blow up themselves, the hostages and the theater."^[1] But the Russian government was never willing to cooperate or negotiate, as evidenced by the lack of official government negotiators at any point in the process. In the early morning hours of 27 October, the hostage crisis ended when Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) special forces (Spetsnaz) pumped an aerosol version of a potent, fast-acting opiate named fentanyl into the theater and then stormed it by force.^[2] The gas prevented the Chechens from mounting any resistance to the assault. The fentanyl, however, had a greater effect than expected. Both hostages and hostage-takers died from the effects of gas inhalation. The death toll rests at 129 hostages and 41 terrorists, a casualty rate of 21%. All but two of the hostages' deaths were due to fentanyl.

Why Resort to Terrorism?

The Chechens resorted to terrorism because they believed the timing was right to confront the regime in Moscow with their demands. It seemed possible to place the Russian regime in a no win situation. President Vladimir Putin had gained political and personal prestige by marketing himself as a "law and order" President.^[3] He would be forced to react to the Moscow theater incident to maintain his reputation. The threat the Chechen terrorists would pose to hundreds of hostages would dictate caution, making Putin appear weak. If Putin followed his instincts and responded violently to the situation, he would confirm Chechen charges that his regime was brutal. Although the use of fentanyl to drug theater occupants created the death toll that the Chechens wanted, there has been little public outcry or legal action that would threaten Putin's legitimacy or force a policy change.

FENTANYL

Basics: Fentanyl is a potent opiate-based narcotic used for anesthesia. Fentanyl is one of several synthetic opioids available by prescription. It is a high potency painkiller that comes in a patch or in a fentanyl lollipop for anesthetizing children or in intravenous form. When used as prescribed it helps cancer patients and chronic pain sufferers manage their pain. Variants of fentanyl have differing strengths. Carfentanil (Wildnil®) is an analogue of fentanyl with an analgesic potency 10,000 times that of morphine and is used in veterinary practice to immobilize certain large animals.

Methods of administration: Oral (lollipops), intravenous (solution), subcutaneous injection (solution) and in patch form is absorbed through the skin and, now, in gaseous form.

Effects: Euphoria, drowsiness, constricted pupils, nausea. The biological effects of the fentanyls are indistinguishable from those of heroin, with the exception that the fentanyls may be hundreds of times more potent.

Possible effects of overdose and risks: People will have different reactions but as little as one of the 25mcg patches when combined with other depressants can lower your respiratory system enough to kill you. Taken in high doses, fentanyl alone can kill you. The deaths in Moscow are attributed to respiratory failure.

Sources:

Addiction Recovery Institute website, "[Fentanyl](#)"
Street Drugs informational website, "[Fentanyl](#)"

Was this Terrorist Act Successful?

Despite the resolution of the hostage situation by the government raid on 27 October, can this terrorist act be considered a success for the Chechens? After all, the Chechens were able to gain international media attention for their cause that they had failed to gain through two wars with Russia. They also were able to show that Chechens could bring the fight to the Russian capital. Infiltrating forces into the Russian capital was no small accomplishment. They had to cover thousands of miles and pass through many checkpoints moving by bus from Grozny to Moscow via Dagestan, crossing borders undetected by the many Russian border and police forces. They also smuggled automatic weapons and a large amount of explosives into the heart of Moscow and hid them for six months prior to the attack. The terrorists received these weapons just before the seizure of 800 Muscovites at the Dubrovka Theater, which is located just blocks from the Kremlin.^[4] This incredible feat showed the inability of the Russian government to prevent Chechens from bringing the battle to Moscow. And it could be used to buoy the spirits of people continuing to resist Russian forces back in Chechnya.

Gaining this national and international attention, however, is probably best considered to be a Pyrrhic victory for the Chechens. The Russian have used the language of the War on Terrorism to justify the raid on the theater, and to launch further attacks into Chechnya and on Chechen rebels alleged to be in the Republic of Georgia. While comparisons to the Israeli raid at Entebbe airport in Uganda in 1976 that freed a large number of hostages may make the Moscow theatre death toll seem quite high, the Russian operation has to be judged in the context that it was likely that all of the hostages were about to die.^[5] Under these circumstances, the Russian public accepted the death toll generated by the use of fentanyl as a necessary evil that was brought about by the Chechen terrorists themselves. International criticism

of Russia also was relatively muted. Denmark initially allowed a Chechen Congress to continue in Copenhagen, but eventually succumbed to Russian pressure to arrest one of the senior Chechen leaders. There was criticism in Russia of a western liberal media bias due to references to Chechens as "dissident" or "insurgents" instead of terrorists and a tendency to blame the Russian government for the loss of life.^[6] But there has been no international outcry or an international movement to intervene in the conflict by putting pressure on Moscow to grant Chechnya its independence.

The United States has made a number of declaratory statements that make it clear that they support the Russian position that depicts the Chechens as terrorists. The National Strategy for Combating Terrorism states "...through our common efforts against terrorism, we are recasting our relations with Russia, China, Pakistan and India."^[7] This shift in policy vis-à-vis Russia generally translates into support for Moscow against the Chechen separatists. Evidence that the Bush administration is willing to back Moscow in this dispute came on 14 February 2003, when the U.S. State Department "designated three Chechen organizations...as terrorist groups under the Executive Order on terrorist financing."^[8]

Conclusion

The Chechens momentarily gained widespread media attention in an attempt to change the political dialogue with the Putin government and the international community. This terrorist operation was intended to capitalize on Western and Russian public opinion that held that it was time that Moscow reached a negotiated end to the conflict. Although they correctly estimated that President Putin's prestige was at stake over the war in Chechnya and that bringing violence to Moscow would force him to act, they did not anticipate the Russian tactical innovation of using fentanyl to disable all of the occupants in the theater. The use of this supposedly "non-lethal" gas garnered public sympathy for the Putin regime and highlighted the senselessness of the Chechen action. In the aftermath of 9/11, Putin can now use the War on Terrorism as political cover for his fight against Chechen rebels, and it is likely that the international community will accept this cover.

The Chechen terrorists who conducted the hostage taking in the heart of Russia have undermined their efforts for an end to the war in Chechnya on their terms. In fact, they are likely to encounter a phenomenon called "backlash." The literature on the decline of terrorism defines backlash as the reduction in popular support for terrorism. This loss of support describes a network of financial, material and social support necessary to continue pursuing its goals. The ability to shape the beliefs and perceptions of the political community out of which terrorism springs is more important than the physical defeat of the terrorist organization. Specific acts of terrorism can delegitimize the terrorist group and deprive it of social support.^[9]

While backlash has been discussed primarily in terms of popular domestic support for terrorist groups, the Moscow hostage crisis is a strong example of a poor strategic decision that may lead to backlash against the Chechen separatists. The backlash that is important here is from the international community that the Chechens wanted to mobilize in support of independence and Russian citizens who the Chechens desired to make calls for an end to the war. These constituencies have now been lost to the Chechen independence movement and their poor strategic choice is the reason. With international support gone, a more traditional backlash may come from the Chechen people themselves as they recognize that this strategic mistake has denied them any leverage to bring about an end to the war. This situation may very well cause Chechens to rethink their support of these terrorist groups.

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References

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2. Fentanyl is used as a surgical anesthetic. See box for more detail. [Addiction Recovery Institute](#), (accessed 23 Feb 2003)
3. BBC News, "[Analysis: Chechen danger for Putin](#)," (accessed 25 October 2002)
4. Moscow Utro, "Website Traces Barayev Terrorist Groups' Transit Route to Moscow via Dagestan," 11 Dec 2002
5. The raid on Entebbe is considered by many to be the model for successful hostage rescue missions. On 27 June 1976 German and Palestinian terrorists hijacked an Air France flight and took it to Entebbe, Uganda. After separating Jewish and Israeli passengers, they freed the remaining passengers and demanded the release of 53 jailed terrorists. On 4 July, The Israeli Defense Forces launched a 2500-mile rescue mission. 103 hostages were rescued, three hostages and one soldier died and seven terrorists and 40 Ugandan police & soldiers were killed. Jeffrey D. Simon, *The Terrorist Trap America's Experience with Terrorism*, Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana Univ Press, 1994, p. 391-392
6. RIA news agency, "Russian Aide Slams Western Media Coverage of Moscow Hostage Drama," 15 Nov 2002
7. US National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, Feb 2003, p20
8. [US State Department Press Release, 28 February 2003](#), (accessed 1 March 2003)
9. Martha Crenshaw, "How Terrorism Declines," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 3:1, (London: Frank Cass, 1991) p. 86

For additional information

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